

Against the Wind

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Against the Wind

by [theopteryx](#)

Summary

Frank is the tutor for the two young children of Michael and Alicia Way. He has always been sickly, but when he begins to fall seriously ill he tries to hide it from his employers, terrified he will lose his position and have nothing. When Michael's older brother Gerard unexpectedly returns from the continent, however, his problems only grow.

Notes

Written for the yobrothatssick challenge. Thanks to my beta mrsronweasley!

The room is dark - more so because of the thick curtains pulled over the windows than the time of day - and light barely seeps around the edges of the fabric, like a pale frame. Frank can't see the storm, but the thick waves of rain pounding against the glass are incessant, overwhelming. There's something behind him - noiseless, but present, like a tug at his spine - and when he turns there's a ghost, and in the shadow next to it, his mother. The storm must have broken through at last, because she's soaking, black dress weighed down and choking with water, and her face is slick with it. Her mouth is moving to speak but he can't hear her over the noise of the rain, and when he looks at the ghost it looks back at him. It's the reason they've all lost their voices, why he can't hear his mother, why when he looks at the ghost he's looking back at himself, and his eyes are shining dots in the black.

*

Frank wakes, startled. There's something tapping at the window and he abruptly turns his head to look, almost instinctively preparing himself for a burst of rain across his cheek. There's no storm, however, just a tree branch swaying gently against the glass, and a bright, thick band of sunlight cuts across the covers to his chest. He exhales and lies back down, staring up at the ceiling. Over six months in this room, in this place, in this *manor*, and he forgets every single time he wakes and everything is still warm.

*

The hallways are packed with servants bustling around, arms full of new, crisp sheets and silver trays. They nod to him, deferring, and Frank nods back, although he is certain it is still too forced. He can't seem to make it look practiced. He stays close to the walls so as not to get in the way until he arrives in the main wing of the house.

The windows in the front hall are raised, propped open with wooden rods, and the servants are rolling up some of the larger carpets from the front hall for where the musicians will go. There are several long, low tables for food underneath the curve of the double staircases, polished silver vases full of flowers already in place, and outside the gardeners are already positioning the ladders to hang the lanterns before the guests arrive, at dusk.

It's not quite autumn yet but there's a crispness to the air that wasn't present only a few weeks ago. The whole house smells refreshed,

turned over, and Frank pulls his coat slightly tighter around him as he ducks down the side passage and into the kitchens, which are even busier than usual.

He tries to keep out of the way, ducking the elbows of the kitchen help as they breeze by, but it's inevitable that someone -

"Mr. Iero!," Chantal calls to him happily from her place at the marble-topped counter. "What a nice surprise. We didn't see you at breakfast this morning."

"Slept in, I'm afraid," Frank says, smoothing down the front of his waistcoat. "You know I'd never miss a meal from you otherwise."

"You can't afford to miss a meal, you're all bones anyway," Chantal says. She's kneading dough and Frank can't help but be temporarily mesmerized by the motions of her warm, white hands. "But I've never known you to sleep in, either. Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes," Frank says, and backs up a little as Laura, one of the cooks, comes hurrying by him with a heavy sheet of unfilled custard cups. "Tired, I suppose. Hard to sleep with so much excitement in the house."

"You've never seen one of their parties, have you?" Chantal asks.

"No, I never have," Frank says, and fights the urge to fidget. He's not new at the manor, not technically, but he doesn't feel his place. Chantal doesn't call him sir like the others, though, at least when they're alone, and it's an unimaginable relief. Frank aches to offer to help, roll up his sleeves and actually do something useful, but knows full well they would never let him, or would think it strange for someone else to desire to do so.

"Well, you're in for a treat," Chantal says. "Lizzie, grab the sugar pots before you head to set the platters, we have to finish off the crusts. And you, Mr. Iero, eat something. There's some cold ham left in the box from this morning, and the scones haven't gone too cold - you look far too flushed, and the day hasn't even truly started yet."

Frank nods, and ducks into the cool back room to fold a scone into a napkin. He puts a hand to his face, just to see, and it is warm, especially against the cold air of the open ice box. It's nothing, though, just excitement, and he doesn't think further of it as he hurries up the stairs to the back parlor, where his real duties await.

"But I want to go *watch*," Matilda pleads. "Mama said the cake for Papa is two stories tall, and I want to *see*."

"I doubt that very much," Frank says, calmly flipping to a new page in the book. "If it *was* two stories tall they wouldn't be able to fit it through the front door and they would have to keep it outside in the garden, where the birds would eat it first."

Matilda looks appropriately horrified, although if it's at the idea that the cake is not, in fact, two stories tall, or that it might be eaten by birds before she can see it, Frank can't be quite sure.

"I hear people are coming from all *over*," James says, pulling Rolph more firmly into his lap until the dog gives in and settles across his legs. "Even as far as the next county."

"Even farther than that!" Matilda counters.

"Your father is a very important man," Frank says, "who would be very glad to know that his children were equally as excited about things like history as they were about cake. English history, in fact, which is an excellent coincidence, because that is what we are studying today."

"Are you going to the party?" Matilda asks, not even moving to pick up her book. She lies back on the chaise and crosses her arms behind her head, and Frank's so startled by the question he doesn't even reproach her for putting her feet on the cushion.

"I - hadn't really considered it," he says. It's a bit of a lie. He had considered it, but not truly all that seriously. Like James said, there would be guests from even the next county. Frank doesn't have any idea of what they would even speak about. That's probably not the point.

"You *must*," Matilda says, with incredible seriousness, as she seems to be at the age where everything deserves such gravitas. "Papa will be so *sad* if you don't, and Mama says there's a *wonderful* surprise for him, and for us, too."

Frank pauses, and smoothes out a crease in the page. Someone has been bending the corners down again, and he frowns at it. "If I agree, will you sit properly on the chaise and listen while I tell you about William the Conqueror?" Frank asks, and Matilda sighs.

“There’s a huge battle at the end,” Frank says. “And somebody gets an arrow through the eye.”

Matilda immediately sits up. “*Really?*” she asks.

“I guess you won’t ever learn,” Frank says sadly. “Since daydreaming about parties is apparently a *far* better use of your tutor’s time than actually *learning*.”

“Can we act it out? Like last week, and Carthage?” James asks, already at attention.

Frank waits, just for a moment, to make sure they’re actually paying attention, but both children are watching him attentively, sitting up straight, eyes wide. Even Rolph seems interested, both ears peaked and his tail momentarily still.

Frank sighs dramatically, and Matilda grins, knowing they’ve won. “Fine,” Frank says, and closes the book. “But I’ll be testing you on this later. Matilda, you’re William the Conqueror. James, you’re Harold. But first - we set the scene.”

*

By the time they get to the coronation Matilda’s hair is out of her ribbons and James’ shirt is untucked and rumpled, but Frank is largely sure they’ve managed to pick up most of the important bits of the Battle of Hastings. He’s feeling exhausted, though, limbs heavy, and it’s too early (and the battle too short) to really warrant the reaction.

He exhales heavily, and there’s a coarseness in his throat that wasn’t present before, like a catch on the end of each breath, and Frank stops, mid-exhale. *No*.

“Mr. Iero,” Matilda says, stopping suddenly, concerned. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Frank says, and smiles at her. “Absolutely fine.”

*

Frank pauses on the staircase back up to his quarters with a hand on his chest. The stairway is empty, for the moment, with most of the servants called to the other side of the manor to attend to the kitchens and the Main Hall. The silence and echo off the cold stone makes his breathing sound even louder, and he feels immediately nauseated at

the thought that someone else might be able to tell.

He undoes the top few buttons of his - too-tight, it feels so tight - shirt so he can put his palm on his skin. It's already clammy, the shirt starting to stick to the back of his neck, along his collarbones. Someone opens the door at the bottom of the stair and laughs loudly to their companion behind them, and Frank fumbles to pull his shirt closed as he hurries up the final two steps up to his landing and through the cracked door to the hall.

*

"Where is the pianoforte?" Frank asks, staring at the empty wall between the two windows. There are long indentions in the carpet where it used to rest, and two deep scratches in the wood of the floor, but the pianoforte itself is gone.

"I sold it," his mother says simply.

"That's Papa's pianoforte," Frank frowns. "You can't-"

"It was your father's pianoforte, and I can," his mother interrupts, not even looking up from the collar of the shirt she's restitching. "Music never made your father any money when he was alive. I am certainly not going to wait around for it to start now that he's dead."

Frank fists his hands by his sides and stares back down at the floor. The space where the stool was, where his father sat for years, is worn, and the carpet rubbed thin where his heels used to rest.

"Come away from the window, Frank, and study your books," his mother says. "You'll catch a death of cold."

*

Frank fumbles with the buttons of his shirtsleeves and tries not to mumble a curse under his breath. The cuffs do not seem to want to cooperate and fasten properly, and once again Frank wishes he could just strip it off and stay in the cool darkness of his bedroom. He can hear the party guests outside, laughing loudly, and the band is already playing a waltz. He's delayed enough - he'll just go down, wish Sir Way many *happy* returns, make sure that Matilda sees he is participating in order to fulfill his end of their agreement, and then make his quiet retreat.

He finally decides that he is dressed presentable enough for the

arriving company, nervously smooths his hair back into place, and hopes his hands don't shake. He isn't nervous, not exactly, but he's *exhausted*, and he has to stop to cough a few times and clear his throat. Breathing is becoming more difficult, has only exacerbated over the course of the afternoon and as the cool night set in over the property. He knows what will come next.

They can't know. Frank is too new, too easily replaced, and he has always been incredibly self-aware about his position. He looks at himself in the mirror, wearing the clothes they provided to him, in a room of their furnishing, and his gut swims with fear.

*

It's easy enough to slip through the east staircase and down through the back gallery to approach the Main Hall from the side, avoiding any potential noticeable entrances. He closes the door behind him and waits until the majority of the crowd has turned to applaud the musicians before he slips through the threshold to stand among them.

Matilda and James had been quite right. Frank recognizes faces from several of the important family dinners he'd witnessed in the few months he'd been residing in Way Manor. Women swirl around him in fine clothing, shining with jewels, and the men look like they belong, backs straight and proud. Frank fights the urge to nod, shrink back - they don't know him here, don't know his position. He fancies himself one of them, if only for a moment, but then the song changes and the couples fluidly move into a dancing formation and Frank immediately feels off-balance, watching the effortless way they move together.

Even with his uncertain footing he cannot help but be swept up in the moment, however. The hall is beautiful, the guests laughing and happy, and the lanterns in the trees rise and sink gently in the trees outside. It is, for the moment, lovely, and Frank sighs deeply.

The sigh catches in his throat, however, and he has to cover his mouth to stifle the rough, sudden sound. The ferocity of the pain in his lungs surprises him, and he has to step back against the wall to steady himself. It's time to retire, he thinks, hand splayed across his chest, as if it could contain the rattling within.

Frank makes his way through the crowd and back towards the escape of the gallery from which he entered. He'll have to apologize to his masters in the morning, when he's feeling better. If he embarrasses them now by causing a scene, he will be mortified.

He's almost there, just past the room full of couples still spinning happily to the music, when a voice calls out across the hall.

"Mr. Iero!" it cries, and Frank turns just in time to stop Matilda from clinging to his trouser leg. "You're here!"

"Of course," Frank says, covering for himself, and turns back to face her properly. "We had a pact. I would never undo such a pact with Miss Matilda Way."

Matilda grins, bright and happy, and Frank is glad she found him. Her hair is a mess, as usual, falling out of the plaits he knows her mother worked so hard to put in place, but she's wearing a new frock and her cheeks are tinged pink from excitement.

"Are you having a good time?" he asks.

"*Wonderful*," she says emphatically, tugging again on his trousers.

"There's cake everywhere and Mama let me have some of the punch - only from the bowl on *that* table, none of the other punch, she made quite clear, but oh - it's just *lovely*, all of the dresses, and fine ladies, and they let me sit up by the musicians and asked me what I would like to hear, and-

"That does sound wonderful," Frank agrees. "Where has your brother gone off to tonight?"

"He's out in the garden with the Saporta boys. Mother sent them all out when they tried to climb on the dessert table. I wanted to go too but I didn't want to miss anything, there's just so much to *see*," she gushes happily.

Her eyes light up, suddenly. "Have you talked to Mama and Papa yet?"

"Oh, no, I haven't," Frank replies, slightly embarrassed. "I haven't actually been able to find them in the crowd."

Matilda grabs his hand and tugs determinedly, and Frank dutifully allows himself to be led back towards the Main Hall. "They are by the dining table," she tells him, pulling him through the crowd. "You *must* say hello to Papa, he asked me where you were and I said I had not seen you and he looked *quite* sad."

"He did?" Frank asks, both surprised and chastised, somehow. He hadn't expected that.

“Of course,” Matilda says, in the tone of voice she reserves for when he’s asked her far too many questions than she cares to dignify to answer.

Sir Michael Way and his wife, the Lady Alicia, are standing by the bottom of the grand staircase, cheerfully talking to another couple.

“Papa!” Matilda calls out happily, and when Sir Way turns to see he smiles warmly, without any indication that it is not genuine. Sir Michael Way, in Frank’s limited experience in the Manor, is a man who is entirely hard to read the majority of the time, but still does not hesitate in expressing himself when he feels the desire to do so.

“Ah, so you did find him at last!” Sir Way says, and nods to Frank. “I wasn’t sure if we’d see you tonight.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world. Happy birthday, sir,” Frank says, and bows slightly - the dignity of which is slightly compromised by Matilda still clinging to his hand, bouncing up and down on her toes.

“So good to see you, Frank,” Lady Way says, smiling kindly, arm wrapped through her husband’s. Her dark, thick hair is pulled off of her neck and the breeze from outside makes the feathers tucked behind her ear sway. She looks radiant, as always, and Frank tries not to feel too small in his simple, dark clothes.

“Will you be here for the surprise?” Matilda asks, tugging at his hand.

“The surprise?” Frank asks, looking from her to the Ways.

Sir Way shrugs and nods towards his wife. “I can’t get a word out of her about it, except that I’ll be thrilled.”

Lady Way smiles coyly. “You will. And soon, Mattie, be patient. We have to wait until the musicians break so everyone can see.”

“It’s not just a surprise for us, then?” Matilda asks.

“It’s a surprise for *everyone*,” Lady Way replies. “Now go find your brother and make sure he isn’t covered in mud before you bring him back in here to watch.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Matilda says, and lets go of Frank’s hand to disappear back through the crowd towards the front of the Hall. Frank feels oddly lost without her little hand clinging to his. He smooths his palm down the front of his waistcoat and hopes the Ways don’t notice

the nervous gesture.

“James was telling us at dinner all about William the Conqueror,” Lady Way says, eyes light. “I have never seen that child so excited about history.”

“Well,” Frank starts, hating himself for always feeling so flustered in their presence, “James is an incredibly smart, quick boy. He learns quite fast.”

“You are too modest,” she says. “The children seem to actually enjoy their lessons, which is something I have never seen before, and we’ve had several tutors over the years who would rather throw up their hands than contend with the children’s spirits. I don’t know quite what methods you use, but we are delighted to have you continue.”

Frank can’t even formulate a response, and can only hope his face doesn’t flush any further - he’s already too warm, and a bead of sweat runs down his spine. He can feel the rattling in his lungs returning, the scratching of a cough beginning at the bottom of his throat. The idea of making a fool of himself, of the Ways seeing, fills him with absolute dread.

The musicians’ song rises in crescendo and the Ways turn for the briefest moment to watch, and Frank seizes the opportunity to let out a sincere “Excuse me” before slipping back through the crowd towards the row of pantries off the gallery behind the grand staircase.

He’s racked with coughs as soon as he makes it around the corner, and he hurriedly ducks into the side room and shuts the door, leaning back against it and futilely covering his mouth to hide the noise. The coughs are painful, jagged, and he can barely catch a breath. It shouldn’t be this bad so soon, it simply makes no sense -

“Are you all right?” someone asks, and Frank is so surprised he almost hits his head against the door, the motion setting off another round of coughing. It’s getting harder to breathe, like something is squeezing his chest.

Finally, *finally*, he gets his breath under control enough to look up. It takes him a few tries - his eyes are watering, he has to blink repeatedly until things swim back into focus - but there’s a man standing in the dark of the pantry, palms up and outstretched towards him, eyes wide.

“Why are you in the cupboard?” Frank asks, and immediately wishes

for another coughing fit so he can't say such embarrassing things to people he doesn't actually know, but his traitorous lungs, for the moment, work as they should.

"Why are *you* in the cupboard?" the man responds, palms lowering slightly.

"I must have had some dust in my throat," Frank says, lightly. "But I'm feeling fine, now, so I should just get back to the party." The embarrassment of being seen like this burns at him, and he's already fumbling with the doorknob behind him to escape back into the main gallery.

"Wait, don't - you can't - don't tell anyone I'm in here," the man says, taking a step towards him, and Frank pauses.

"Are you...supposed to be in the cupboard?" Frank asks, his mind racing. Should he call for help? Is this man planning something? He could have just wandered in through the back hall, the servants would be too busy tonight to notice - but finally his thoughts catch up with him and he pauses, assessing. The man is dressed too finely to be a wanderer, and if he is there for nefarious purposes he's doing an excellent job of appearing almost entirely harmless.

He's dressed in all black, except for a deep gray waistcoat, and pale, smooth skin that Frank can see clearly even in the dim light of the pantry. A gentleman, surely. It's strange - he can still hear the music from the musicians playing in the Main Hall, but through the door it sounds muted, otherworldly, and makes the entire situation seem even more odd.

"I am supposed to be in the cupboard," the man says. "But no one knows I am in the cupboard, so you cannot tell anyone."

"Why are you supposed to be in the cupboard?" Frank asks, curiosity piqued.

"I feel like perhaps I should be the one asking you the questions," the man says. "After all, this is my cupboard. I've grown quite comfortable here."

"I think perhaps you have spent too long in here, rather," Frank says.

"You are entirely right," the man says. "I'm going to start thinking of the sacks of flour of confidantes if I have to stay in here much longer. Has the band almost finished playing?"

“Yes, I think they’re nearing a break. They are going to announce Sir Way’s birthday surprise, and -” Frank stops, finally really looking at the man in front of him. Something about him suddenly seems so familiar, although he knows he’s never seen the man in front of him before.

“You’re Gerard Way,” Frank says, and immediately wishes he could cover his mouth and disappear. But now that he’s made the connection, it’s obvious. He’s seen Gerard Way’s face hundreds of times, in dozens of paintings throughout the family gallery. He looks different than in most of the paintings, however - thinner, older, with impressively disheveled hair, and a bright, slightly lopsided smile that is absent from most of the art.

“I am indeed,” the man says, seemingly delighted that Frank figured it out, rather than annoyed at his impropriety.

“You’re the birthday surprise,” Frank says, finally putting it together. Sir Way spoke often of his older brother and always in fond, warm tones, but never recently in any way that hinted that he was arriving back from his life overseas.

“I am *indeed*,” Master Way says, and bounces up and down on his toes. It’s a motion that reminds him so much of Matilda that Frank is amazed he didn’t spot the resemblance immediately. “Does he have any idea?” Master Way asks, seriously.

“No, not a one,” Frank says. “How long have you been in here?”

“Forever,” he sighs. “I’m starving. I may have eaten most of the tin of biscuits they’d left in here. Don’t tell Alicia.”

“I won’t,” Frank says. “Well. Yes. It was very nice to meet you - I - I should be going.”

“Are you sure?” Master Way asks. “It’s a lonely cupboard. You are actually very welcome to stay.”

“No, I would - hate to impose,” Frank manages. He’s humiliated, truly, to be in such close quarters with Sir Way’s older brother and to have spoken so forwardly with him. Somewhere in his mind his mother is fussing at him for being so rude, so unheeding of proper society rules. He’ll have to apologize profusely later, when he’s not on the verge of embarrassing himself with his faulty, weak lungs.

Behind him, he can hear the band come to a full, beautiful crescendo,

and then fall into silence.

“That’s my cue,” Master Way says, grinning. He takes a step forward and Frank fumbles at the doorknob before he can step even closer, opening the door and allowing him to pass him by and into the gallery. Master Way straightens, and brushes the front of his coat. “I have to go surprise my brother. Shall I see you at the party?” he asks, and he seems genuinely interested. “I hear there’s food even besides biscuits from the pantry.”

“Oh - y-yes,” Frank manages, back still pressed to the open door. Master Way must not realize Frank is practically a servant, and to point it out would be almost all the more humiliating. Master Way smiles.

“Excellent. A pleasure,” he says, nodding a little, and then walks quietly and confidently towards the light that spills from the open doors of the Main Hall.

Frank stays where he is, still holding onto the door. There’s silence, and someone speaking, and then a joyful, happy swelling of voices that Frank knows is Master Way’s arrival onto the scene. He can only imagine the happiness on Sir Way’s face, but he doesn’t see it for himself, as he finally makes his exit down the quiet back hallways until he is alone again in his room. He can still hear the faint noise of the band downstairs, but it’s drowned out by the rattle of his lungs, the rough exhale of every breath.

*

Frank is so relieved to finally make it to the familiar bookshop at the end of the street that he completely forgets about easing the door open so as to not ring the heavy, weighted bell that hangs above the frame. It tolls loudly, cutting through the respectful silence of the shop, and the other customers stop to look his way.

The owner, Mr. Fornsworth, gives him a curt nod from behind the front counter and Frank nods back, embarrassed. He hopes Mr. Fornsworth doesn’t notice the freezing mud streaked all up and down his trouser legs. He’s well known enough there that they won’t kick him out for loitering, but he’s in no place to pay for a book today. He’d been underdressed and unprepared for the storm that had broken over the town as he was walking back to his lodgings, and attempting to make it the two miles back in this weather was impossible. He knew better than to try.

He pushes his soaking hair out of his face and makes his way down the

aisle closer towards the inside of the store, where they usually keep a fire running in the large, squat office.

There is a young couple in one of the aisles and Frank has to angle his back to pass them by without dragging his wet coat along the spine of any of the books. When he arrives at the end of the aisle - and can feel the heat from the next room, finally - he makes sure to turn so his back bears the brunt of the warmth, especially his soaked collar and hair. He has a better view of the couple from the spot, and he picks up a book so as not to appear as if he is watching.

It's hard not to look, though - they are young, he can tell, both dressed impeccably, and obviously infatuated. The girl is slight, and pretty, with a pale oval face and light freckles on her nose. She's holding a book and fawning over the illustrations - Frank can see from the distance that it's a first edition, probably one of the Hartsteads that just arrived, and his heart pangs a little with the jealousy. He cannot imagine the price.

The man is tall and lean, with dark, sharp features and a waxed mustache, standing slightly behind her and to the side. His hand barely hovers over her waist, not touching, but like a nervous bird afraid to land. Frank tries to hide the smile at the corner of his mouth that he knows is showing. About to be engaged, then, if they aren't already wed.

He gets absorbed in the Shelley he's picked up - it's fascinating, but unfortunately a new edition so he'll have to wait until it has been moved to one of the other shelves and passed over a few times - and completely tunes out the rest of the sounds of the store. He can almost begin to feel the warmth start seeping back into his bones. At some point, however, he glances up, and finds the gentleman staring at him.

Really staring at him. Frank's face flushes immediately, and he almost fumbles with his book, narrowly avoiding losing his grip completely. He's not used to anyone looking at him, not really, and the gentleman had been looking at him - like - Frank doesn't know, but suddenly he's too warm, and uncomfortably so.

"Rupert, dearest," the girl coos. "Have you even been listening?"

"Of course," the man says, voice light. "Every word."

She sighs with genuine affection, and cradles the book to her chest as she pulls the man away and down the aisle towards the front of the store. Frank stares at the floorboards until he can see out the corner of his eye that they've moved enough for him to slip by, undetected. He does so, not even caring that the bell rings loudly after him, not even caring that the

cold, wet air immediately drains any of the warmth he had stored. It's not until he is almost half a mile down the road that he realizes that he is still clutching the book in his hands, fingers wrapped tight around the covers, the whole thing soaked. He pauses, momentarily torn with the decision, but continues on apace.

*

"But why *can't* we play Battle of Hastings again?" Matilda asks, dangling her feet off the side of the chaise. "This part is so *dull*."

"Because we've already covered the battle," Frank says, trying hard not to let his impatience show. "And sometimes history is full of dull bits."

Matilda sighs and rests her head on her hands. Both of the children look slightly bored, and tired, especially coupled with the excitement and late hour of the night before, but the idea of orchestrating a battle is just too much for Frank to contemplate at the moment. Especially when all of his limbs feel like they are made of lead.

"Are you all right, sir?" James asks, quietly, as an aside. "Is the fire too warm?"

Frank's body is freezing, but his face must be flushed. It's becoming more noticeable, apparently, and if James can pick up on it - still more astute to subtle things than his sister, but not traditionally the most observant - Frank is not doing a very good job of hiding it.

He steels himself, and takes a deep breath - not deep enough to rattle the coughs he know are waiting, but enough. "Have either of you ever read one of William Shakespeare's plays?" he asks, picking up another book from the table in front of him.

"One of the other tutors tried, but they just have so many *words*," Matilda groans.

"But also swordfights," Frank says, flipping to the table of contents and running his finger down the paper until he comes across the number. "And love in disguise, and magic, and plenty of parties."

"I don't remember any parties," Matilda says, disbelieving.

"Or swordfights," James adds, sitting up straight. "Are there really swordfights? I thought it was mostly lots of people saying boring poetry."

“Well, there is some poetry,” Frank says, “but there are also plenty of parts where people fight *and* say poetry. Also some truly spectacular death scenes.”

“You are the *best* tutor *ever*,” Matilda says, and Frank smiles down at his book.

*

“Don’t bite your thumb at me! I bit mine first! That’s unfair!” James cries, gesturing at his sister. Rolph barks, running around his legs, excited by the proceedings.

“A plague on your house! And yours! And *yours*!” Matilda says gleefully. “Plagues everywhere!”

“That’s not technically your line, but we’ll allow it this time,” Frank says. “Now, Matilda Montague! Are you ready to fight against James Capulet?”

“Why are we fighting again?” Matilda asks, pausing to push the loose hair from her braids back off of her face, other hand loosely grasping the book of the script.

“Because,” Frank says. “People do very silly things and fight about very silly things that they can’t even remember. And because he’s a Capulet.”

“Probably because you stole the Capulet’s custard cup at the party last night,” James says.

“You said I could have it!” Matilda says, stomping her feet a little.

“Montagues! Capulets! Pay attention!” Frank says, raising his hand to catch their eyes. “Matilda, you will be Mercutio. James, you will be Tybalt, now -”

“Who is going to be Romeo?” someone asks behind him, and Frank is so startled he actually drops the book in his hand. He ducks quickly to pick it up and turn, book cradled against his chest.

Master Way is standing in the doorway, smiling wide.

“Uncle!” Matilda cries, and runs over to him. “We’re playing *Shakespeare*.”

“So I see! It seems Mr. Iero is instilling a true appreciation for poetry

in you yet,” Master Way says. Frank can’t tell if he’s joking, or teasing, or - but - *Mr. Iero*, oh, God, he must have talked to Sir Way, and now he knows who Frank is, knows that he’s just the tutor, and now he will never forgive him for being so rude to him in the cupboard at the party the night before.

“And *swordfights*,” James says from next to Frank.

“Those always were the best parts,” Master Way says lightly. “May I join you?”

“Oh, Master Way, you don’t -” Frank starts, immediately embarrassed by the whole situation. The Ways have always left him alone to teach as he saw fit, and he is suddenly incredibly worried that his methods will seem...simple. Peasant. Is Master Way there to spy, to report back on what he sees? Are they worried about his abilities? His head feels faint, the room starting to swim.

“You must!” Matilda says, tugging on Master Way’s hand. “You can be Romeo.”

“Only if Mr. Iero agrees not to call me Master Way again,” he says, watching Frank’s face. “It’s so formal I do believe I will forget who I am. Gerard will be fine, unless Romeo is my part.” Frank becomes aware that he probably looks horrified, face red.

“Oh, yes, of course,” he says, covering as quickly as he can and reopening the book in his hands to the slightly-dented page. “We’ve just started, still in Act I.”

“Excellent,” Gerard says warmly, and Frank looks back down at his book. “Are you Juliet?” he asks Matilda.

“I’m Mercutio!” she says proudly. “I die soon. It’s incredibly dramatic.”

“So I’ve heard!” Gerard says, amused. “Well, all right then, let’s get to the good part.”

*

Gerard, as Frank comes to learn, is quite a natural performer. He knows many of the lines by heart, and captivates Matilda and James with his dramatic gestures and proclamations as he strides about the room.

Matilda had quickly claimed the part of Juliet - Frank had been terrified, for a moment, that she would declare *him* to play the part, and he really did not need another reason for his face to redden - and took to it with aplomb, especially when Gerard lifted her onto the table to play the balcony scene.

Frank is relegated to the director of the scene, which suits him just as well, off to the side (and making sure Matilda does not gesture so grandly she falls off the edge of the table). He cannot remember the last time he enjoyed a lesson so thoroughly, and finds himself actually laughing along at Gerard's overly dramatic acting.

He looks up from the book at one moment, about to set the next scene, and finds Gerard watching him with a light, happy smile on his face. His eyes are warm, and Frank's hands still around the pages of the book, a finger light on the next line.

*

They get all the way to the secret wedding when the bell rings to call them to dinner, and the children actually groan in disappointment.

"We'll finish it up soon," Frank promises, collecting the books that he had spread out on the table.

"But I want to know what *happens*," Matilda says, leaning against the table.

"Terrible things," Gerard says. "And more poetry."

"Wonderful," Matilda says happily, and takes James' hand to lead him out of the study. Gerard stays behind, however, hand on the door frame. Frank becomes acutely aware of the fact that they are alone together, and his mind flashes back to the night before at the party.

"I'm so sorry about - about the cupboard," Frank manages, neatly lining up the edges of some of his papers.

"For what?" Gerard asks, sounding completely baffled.

"Last night at the party, in the cupboard. For - my rudeness, and lack of propriety. I was surprised, and apparently forgot all my manners, and -" Frank begins, but Gerard simply shrugs and waves a hand.

"I wouldn't expect anyone to be prepared for strange men hiding in cupboards," Gerard says. "I should be apologizing to you."

"I - I should have introduced myself properly," Frank says, lifting the stack of books into his arms. "I didn't mean to lead you to think I was -"

"You didn't lead me to think anything," Gerard says. "You were quite polite, even after I admitted to talking to sacks of flour, and did not, in fact, tell anyone I was in the cupboard. The only slight I can find is that I did not see you again at the party."

Frank is startled that he remembered the suggestion. "Oh - no, I'm afraid not. I retired early."

"Well in that case, you can make it up to me by joining the family for dinner," Gerard says, tapping two of his fingers against the frame.

"I can't," Frank replies immediately.

Gerard raises his eyebrows, obviously surprised at the denial.

"Well, I *can*," Frank begins again. "I just - I usually take dinner up in my room. I'm not properly dressed. You really don't have to-"

"I don't," Gerard says, smiling. "And you don't, if you don't actually want to, but my brother speaks highly of you, as does Alicia, and the children love you. It would be quite nice to speak over food that was not a half-empty tin of biscuits in the servant's pantry."

Frank hesitates, and then sets the stack of books back down on the table. He's tempted to decline - it would be proper, and surely Gerard exaggerates out of obligation - but he thinks of the simple meal and plain toast he would normally take up in his quiet room, and suddenly it doesn't seem appealing at all.

"That would be quite nice, thank you," Frank says, and Gerard grins.

*

The meal is entirely different than anything Frank has ever experienced before. His family meals were usually his mother and him sitting at their small wooden table by the fire, his mother's cold hands holding his while she recited grace.

There are still several relatives in town for Sir Way's birthday party, and the entire dining room is lively and full, lit bright with candlelight and the newly-polished silverware. Frank nervously tugs at the hem of his coat as he follows Gerard into the room, slightly terrified they will

send him away.

“Frank!” Sir Way calls out happily. “So glad you could join us. It’s largely remains from the party last night, as most of the kitchen staff has the day off, but I hope you won’t mind the repeat.”

“Oh, no, not at all,” Frank says, bowing his head slightly. He’s never actually dined with them before, and darts his eyes around the table, looking for somewhere to sit.

“Here, Frank,” Gerard says, gesturing to the empty seat beside him. Every other seat at the table is taken, and Frank cannot help but wonder if Gerard had mentioned to them even before he arrived at the lesson that morning that he would be extending Frank an invitation.

*

Frank remains quiet through most of the meal - he’s overwhelmed by the laughter, the ease with which the family converses as they eat, so obviously happy to be in one another’s company. The ill feeling which had been plaguing Frank for the majority of the day is momentarily relieved, even though his appetite remains thin and he can barely manage to push the food lightly around on his plate.

*

The next day at lessons, Gerard arrives again, just when the childrens’ minds are set to wander. He isn’t there the next day, but on Thursday he knocks at the door again, midway through the morning Geography plan. He spins the ancient globe on his knee and points out all of countries he’s visited, and many of the - tamed-down, Frank is certain - stories of his times in each. Matilda and James are fascinated.

Frank is selfishly glad for it. He wishes he could blame it all on Gerard’s ability to convince Matilda and James that just about any learning experience is an exciting one, giving Frank a modicum of a rest when it seems like he tires earlier and earlier as the days progress. Gerard smiles so freely, though, seems so at ease, Frank can’t help but watch him, as if it is a quality he himself could learn.

Gerard is a foreboding Prospero, a manic Puck, and a truly moving Frankenstein - one of Frank’s favorite stories, although he doesn’t voice it aloud. Gerard helps Frank when he needs it, a few times when he doesn’t, and sometimes - he simply slips in the room in the middle of a lesson, greets the children, and props himself in the corner with a sketchbook and a pencil, gently scritchng away as Frank helps the

children pick out Polaris on a star map.

*

Frank is walking down the art gallery late one night, long after the candles in the Main Hall have been put out, on his way to the kitchen to hopefully make some tea to soothe his throat, when he is completely startled by the figure of a man in shadows at the other end of the gallery.

Frank immediately takes a step back, hiding behind the heavy wood of the door frame. It's Gerard, still dressed, although his waistcoat appears unbuttoned, standing on one of the long, low benches that are scattered around the walls of the gallery where the frames of the paintings don't hang too low.

Gerard looks strange, far off and undisturbed, and the gallery is so dark Frank can only make out the pale of his skin outside the jut of black cloth that makes up his clothes. He's facing a painting - Frank can't see, but he knows by memory that it's a family portrait, back when Gerard and Sir Way were barely into their teens. Just before his parents passed away, and a few years before the death of their grandmother, if Frank remembers correctly.

He feels suddenly, horribly intrusive - this is obviously a private moment, and Frank is spying, but he can't seem to pull himself away. Gerard isn't smiling, or leaning against the door frame of Frank's study, or making any dramatic gestures. He looks so young, in the dim light, and unmoving, it's almost like looking directly at one of the portraits.

Gerard raises a hand and gently touches something on the painting in front of him. A face, a hand, the feeling of the oils, Frank can't be sure, but it is a tender gesture and he hears Gerard sigh, so low, so resigned, that Frank's heart aches.

There's a tickle in the back of Frank's throat and he knows a cough is on the way. He pulls himself back and darts down the side hall, giving the gallery as wide of a berth as possible. He drinks his tea in the quiet, dark kitchen as quickly as he can without scalding his mouth, and when he passes back to his room he glances into the gallery. Gerard is gone, the only sign he was there in the first place a palm-sized smear in the frosting on the glass by the portrait, where he'd obviously leaned over to look outside.

*

“Iero, there’s a message here for you. A courier from the service,” the landlord says, hand still on the doorknob, his face grave. Frank’s mouth immediately goes dry.

It’s a short letter, sparse, and Frank reads it quickly while the courier waits by the side of his desk, patiently holding the small wrapped parcel in his hands. His mother is dead, it tells him, in short, fat type. They have already arranged the funeral. She is buried next to his father, and the parcel is for him.

The courier hands it to him, bows lightly, and then quietly disappears. Frank wonders, almost in a haze, how many messages he’s had to deliver today, if they all were like Frank’s. He has to sit - his knees won’t support him, like all the marrow has been sucked out of his bones - and the string holding the package closed is wet and knotted, almost impossible to undo. He ends up having to slash it with his dinner knife.

There’s no letter inside, no note. His mother’s necklace - a plain, gold locket his father gave to her for their wedding, the portraits inside too faded and damp to ever be able to recognize a face. Some legal documents from their lawyer. Her tiny, worn book of prayers, with the ribbon she embroidered herself, Hallowed be Thy name in her meticulous, faded red stitches down the middle. And, at the bottom, a small envelope, not even sealed, with a few crumpled bank notes inside.

There is nothing else. Frank holds the necklace so tightly in his fist he’s surprised it doesn’t crack, but when he realizes and opens his palm there’s a deep, red heart pressed into the skin. He stands up, pulls on his coat, and goes down the street to the pub.

The orchard on the south side of the Manor is long, squat and sprawling. It would produce more in season if the family took more diligent care with it, but Lady Way has always remarked on how fond she was that it was a little bit wild, and the gardeners have kept it healthy and in some semblance of order, but only just enough to let it do what it wished.

Several trees gnarl together at the top, blocking out the light in patches, and the ground is a maze of knotted tree roots and slightly swollen, bruised fruit. It is one of Frank’s favorite places on the entire estate.

He is sitting on the low, white stone wall along the east side with a book on his lap as Matilda and James run about under the trees. He’d

been working all morning with them on numbers and figures, but the monotony had proved too much for their dispositions and he'd relented in taking them outdoors for a bit. Even he was the slightest bit relieved - numbers were never quite as exciting as swordfights, and even he could agree to that.

The clouds rolling in over the woods in the distance are sleek and a cool, foreboding grey, but Frank can't help but enjoy the moment. There's a storm coming in by the evening, with a sharp breeze rolling the dead leaves about his feet, but it feels nice, and mimics the children as they chase each other through the trees.

"I was starting to think you only existed in that study, like some little spirit," a voice says behind him, and Frank turns to see Gerard approaching from the direction of the house, hands deep in the pockets of his thick coat. He's smiling warmly, collar turned up against the wind, and his hair is messily whipped about his face even more than usual.

"Do you usually see spirits in the daylight hours?" Frank asks, pushing his own loose hair back off of his face. "I thought they usually took to wandering halls at night, with chains and things." He thinks of Gerard, briefly, hand outstretched towards the painting on the wall, but out in the light of day it seems like a passage from a book he once read, rather than anything real.

Gerard sits down next to him on the wall, hands still deep in his pocket. "A different kind of spirit, perhaps," he says. "Maybe one that lives in the little spaces between books, or the lines on a page."

Frank holds his tongue as he looks out into the orchard as Matilda's dark curls dart between the gaps in the trees. "I'm afraid to admit that I am quite the opposite of supernatural, quite real, and stuck to the earth. It must come as such a disappointment."

"Not in the least," Gerard says, and Frank ignores the way his stomach flips. "Well, if you are going to ruin my exciting theory, the least you can do is tell me where you *did* you come from, before this, if not the pages of the library?" he asks. He seems so genuinely interested, like the stories of Frank's history could ever in some way rival his own.

-

Hours later Frank is so drunk he can barely walk, has to keep his feet planted firmly on the low brass rung around the bottom of the dark wooden bar. There are a couple of men in the corner playing music,

something bright and lively, but Frank tunes them out to just watch the piano player's thin, quick hands. He sips again at his gin, letting it burn in his mouth before he swallows it down. The necklace is still in his palm, dead metal against his skin, but he keeps his fist tight. He feels disgusting and queasy and he doesn't want any more, doesn't, can't, but he's paid for it, paid for it with the money from the parcel, and he can't let it go to waste.

He looks up again - time has passed, he cannot tell how long - and suddenly the gentleman from the bookstore is at the other side of the bar, turned towards the musicians. He sees Frank - or he's been watching him forever, it feels like - and gives Frank the slightest nod and a small, practiced motion of the wrist. His gloves are clean, the edges of his shirt pressed and cuffed closed. He doesn't belong there, but acts like he does.

Something pools in Frank's belly, hot and dark and writhing, and he knows it's not the gin. It looks like the man is going to come over to him, maybe speak, but Frank can't bear it, doesn't know what he'll do. He slides off the stool and shoves several more bank notes from the envelope across the bar before he slips out the back door and stumbles into the street.

*

The next morning he awakens with the worst headache he has ever had in his life. He can't even open his eyes. He is still in his clothes from the night before, sans coat, and the buttons on his waistcoat are half-buttoned, almost entirely incorrectly. Frank almost doesn't mind the headache as it means there isn't any room for anything else in his mind, not damp parcels or unsealed envelopes or his mother, sitting by the fire, always stitching.

The next morning he wakes, cleans himself, shaves, and goes down to the post office to put in a notice to the paper. He spends the next three weeks holed up in his room, reading, re-reading, and tending to his books. Knowledge, his mother always said, would be the only thing that would ever truly save him, make him better than himself. He doesn't know how much stock he puts into the idea, but it is a distraction, and helps him to ignore how foolish he was to think someone would see his advertisement and care.

On the third week, however, there's a courier again - a different one, and Frank is selfishly glad - at his door, with another note. This one, however, is handwritten, in a loose, casual hand, and the tone is warm. There's no necklace, just an offer, and two days later Frank packs up the rest of his books into his small suitcase. He spends the last note from the envelope in renting a carriage to take him towards the address listed at the bottom of

the letter. The Sincerely Yours had been underlined twice.

He's never traveled out of the county before, but he honestly cannot care, especially when there is the hope - foolish that it may be - that somewhere exists where people expect him to arrive, and sincerely so.

-

"Just on the other side of Dalton, actually," Frank says. The very far, *other* side, where a family like the Ways would undoubtedly pass around, shades on their carriage doors pulled firmly down. Not that he could ever blame them, really, as he always wished to do the same.

"Mikey mentioned you haven't gone home, yet, even mentioned it, even with the upcoming holiday," Gerard says, and it takes Frank a moment to realize even what he has said, he is so caught up in reconciling the largely stoic Sir Way with the *Mikey* of Gerard's warm affection. Eventually, however, he is pulled back to the present and his entire body stills. "Doesn't your family miss you all the way up here? I'm sure you could invite them up for a spell, there's plenty of room for guests," Gerard continues.

"That's quite all right," Frank says, far more stiffly than he actually feels, but Gerard's face falls immediately.

"Oh, Frank," he says, with such familiarity in his voice that Frank is almost light-headed with it. "I'm so sorry - I'm always doing that, saying things I shouldn't, Mikey will never forgive me for being such a fool. I apologize. I'm terrible about prying."

"No, it's all right," Frank repeats, leaning back to a more comfortable position on the wall. "It is what it is, even if it's just me." He hesitates, looking back down at the book in his hands. "And spaces between books, or the lines on the page."

Gerard is quiet on the wall beside him. His boots are muddy, spattered with it all up the sides of his calves and trousers. It hasn't rained yet, which either means he's been out in the stables, or down by the creek on the other side of the property. Probably sketching again, if the dark tips of his fingers are any indication, and when he swipes them across his face to push back his hair they leave a dark smudge against the pale of his cheekbone.

Gerard turns, then, and catches Frank's eye, pausing the motion, but Frank is saved having to duck his head in apology by a cry coming out from within the depths of the trees. He has to shift farther away from

Gerard to see what is actually happening, and he is relieved by even the modicum of space between them again. "James!" he calls out, frowning. "Don't throw things at your sister, or we'll have to go back inside early."

"You're quite good with them, you know," Gerard says. "They talk about you all the time."

"Really, now," Frank says, scoffing a little, settling more back into his place, still slightly farther from Gerard than he was before. "I can't imagine there is much to say."

"I can," Gerard says, so simply, as if the notion that Frank is an interesting thing to discuss is fact. "Although they are terrible about talking about the things I really want to know."

"Well, what about you," Frank says, desperate to change the subject away from himself. "I've heard plenty of your stories about what happened to you on the continent. Why did you decide to go in the first place?"

"I would say studying art and literature, but it was largely an excuse for me to do foolish things from out of the view of our extended relatives," Gerard says lightly. "They love me, most certainly, but more often when I wasn't around making a mess of things."

Frank feels so completely unsteady about the whole conversation he has to make sure both of his feet are planted firmly on the ground. He's strangely, irrationally angry that he never had any siblings to speak to - Gerard speaks so frankly, so honestly, it seems the only way was to have had an outlet in which to do so, separate than the way Frank writes things in a small, curved hand in his own private journals.

"May I ask you a question?" Frank asks, pausing, hoping he is not about to step too far, even as Gerard's presence makes him forget about the rules that govern him, even for the moment. "Why...why is the manor Sir Way's, and not yours? As the eldest?"

Gerard is quiet for a moment, and rubs the toe of his boot against an exposed root. Some of the mud dried on the leather flakes off. "I signed it over to him after our grandmother died. It seemed unfair to keep it when I was never going to be the one to fill it with a family."

"Really?" Frank asks, completely surprised. "But - you seem so good with the children."

“Not in my future, I’m afraid. Mikey’s always been better with the estate, anyway, more tied to it than I was. I spent so much of my childhood wishing to be anywhere else but here, it would have been very cruel to keep it. It’s much better this way, full of people, and family. Purpose.”

“Yes,” Frank agrees, thinking back to the warm, bright dining room, the night after the party for Sir Way’s birthday. “I - It’s nice,” he finishes, rather lamely, embarrassed by the idea that Gerard might see how attached he is to the house, when Frank is just a guest.

“Uncle!” Matilda calls out from the trees, interrupting his thoughts as she runs quickly over to them. “I didn’t know you were here! How long have you been here?”

“I just arrived,” Gerard says, smiling. “It’s just about time for tea, would you like to head back, or is there more to the lesson for today?” He looks at Frank at the last part, and there’s something about his mouth - bemused, wry, *something* - that Frank can’t figure out.

“Let’s go,” Matilda says, “and quickly, before James comes over. He threw a stick at me. We should leave him.”

“I’m afraid your mother would be very disappointed in me if we did, even for stick-throwing,” Gerard says, and takes her little hand in his.

James runs up past Frank to lope along beside Gerard as they head back over the little hill towards the front of the house. Gerard pauses, only once, to look over his shoulder and make sure Frank is close behind, but Matilda pulls on his hand to point out a little sparrow hanging upside down to the branch of the oak, and he turns away again.

*

Frank coughs so deeply, so wretchedly, it almost knocks him off his feet. He’s alone in the stairwell, thankfully, but he’s sure the noise he is making will attract too much notice - he can’t be seen like this, he *can’t*. He tries to make it up to the hallway, but his legs are shaking, and he has to cling to the banister as he slides to his knees.

It’s been getting worse - mostly in the mornings and the evenings, as the dew settles in earlier, but will soon turn to frost - and his attempts to conceal it, will it away, are failing.

He can’t breathe. There’s no air in his lungs to expel. It is as though

his throat has shriveled and been scoured rough, like bare hands on splintered wood.

He wakes, still in the stairwell, hands looped weakly around the bottom of the banister, forehead against the strut. He jerks away, and up, and stumbles up the steps, completely drenched in sweat. He can't tell if he was out for seconds, or even minutes, but it was all too long. Too long, too close, if someone had seen him -

He hurries down the hallway to his room, closing the door firmly behind him. He's shaking, either from sickness or from fear, and he cannot tell which feels worse.

*

He wakes up in the morning and the sheets stick to him, damp with his own sweat, but when he crawls out of bed to stoke the fire he realizes he never had even lit it the night before. The frost outside is heavy on the ground, making every blade sharp and white.

*

"Are you all right, sir?" James asks. "We can work in our planners for today, if you would like."

"But I want to do a *play*," Matilda says, sighing heavily, but James just shakes his head.

"Not today, Mattie," James says, and moves to sit down beside her on the ground by the fire, book in his lap.

Frank is so exhausted he can't even lie, so he just nods and bends back over his book. He has to excuse himself halfway through to make it down to the lavatory where he can lean against the lip of the sink and blot the sweat at his brow.

He catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror and is horrified by the dark circles under his eyes, the pale pallor of his cheeks. He pinches them, briefly, to restore some color, and heads back to the study.

*

"Mr. Iero!" Chantal calls out. "I knew it was you who was always moving my tea kettles about."

"I'm sorry," Frank manages, and tries to clear his throat to soften the

rough edges of the words. "Truly - I'm a creature of habit, I suppose, and more often than not that means tea after the rest of the house has gone to bed."

"No need to apologize, dearest, we've got plenty in the kitchen. If you'd like, we can have someone send up a cup during last rounds, instead of making you come all the way down here in the cold."

"Oh - you really don't need to, it's quite fine," Frank starts, but Chantal rolls her eyes at him fondly. It is amazing how she can appear so motherly when her forearms are still flecked with red spots from the chickens she has been preparing all morning for the roasting pans. There are still a few feathers drifting about on the floor, and Frank makes sure to keep out of their way.

"You and that Mr. Way, up all hours, I don't know how you do it," she says. "We already bring him a cup, it won't be a bit of trouble, and I won't have to worry about my misplaced teapots anymore."

"Are you really quite sure?"

"Of course," Chantal says. "It's so nice to have this house full again, I'll bring tea to anybody who asks."

"You - you mean with Mr. Way here," Frank asks, hesitating by the door.

"Yes, indeed. Such a charmer, and the whole house just lights up when he comes back. It's a rare treat we even get to see him for this amount of time."

Frank runs his thumbnail into a groove in the old wood. "How long does he usually stay?" he asks, aiming for nonchalance.

Chantal shrugs, and slides a few more sliced onions into the hollows of the chickens, her hands working quickly to seal them with twine. "A week or two, usually. He's quite popular in town and abroad, and hasn't really liked staying here for too long since their grandmother Lady Way passed away, just a few years after their parents. I'm surprised he hasn't left for the continent again already."

A week or two - it's been three weeks, at the least, since the night of the birthday party, and Frank hasn't heard a word about his departure. He realizes, quite acutely, that he doesn't want to.

“James,” Frank asks quietly, later in the week during the lesson. “Have you - have you perhaps heard anything about your Uncle leaving again? For the continent?”

James frowns down at the atlas in his hands, thumbs framing the Atlantic. “I don’t believe so. He mentioned bringing us to town to look for presents for the Holiday, and he seemed quite excited, so I hope he doesn’t leave before that. Would he leave before that?” he asks, eyes widening as he turns to Frank.

“I’m sure not,” Frank asks, soothing him, trying to hide his own relief. “No. I’m sure not.”

*

Frank is in the gallery one evening, on his way back to his rooms after picking up a few more books from the study for his own personal research. It hasn’t started snowing outside yet, but it is lurking on the edges, and Frank is glad they already have the fires stoked to their maximum this early in the season. He shivers a little and coughs, covering it with his hand, and has to pause for a moment in the quiet gallery.

He looks up and finds himself in front of the portrait that Gerard touched that one night, and Frank immediately steps closer to it, practically climbing up on the bench himself.

It’s a largely typical family portrait, Frank guesses. The Ways flank young Michael and Gerard, and their grandmother stands in the middle, standing tall and proud behind Gerard, a hand on his shoulder. Gerard in the portrait looks so like him, and yet so different, as though cut from the same cloth but formed into something else entirely.

Frank touches the canvas, hesitantly, but can’t feel anything but the smooth pattern of the layered oils on the canvas beneath his fingers.

*

They are in the middle of a lesson one stormy, bleak day when Frank glances down at the sketchbook Gerard had temporarily set down while he bent over to listen to the secret that Matilda insisted on whispering in his ear.

It’s a sketch of the room, Frank sees, with strange, crosshatched layers, and twisting vines and flowers creeping out of the spaces between the

missing books on the shelves. There's a person - Frank recognizes it immediately as himself - the unruly bit of hair on the back of his head, his hunched shoulders as he sits next to James, pointing out something in the lesson book on his lap. Gerard has taken the most care to sketch Frank, measured shadows and fine, sharp lines around his face and hands, out of all of the rest of the things in the room, and Frank has to cling to the mantelpiece to stop himself from swaying too noticeably with the fact that he is - and has been - hopelessly, utterly, in love.

Gerard looks up at him then, Matilda still whispering in his ear, and smiles at him like it's them who are sharing a secret instead of him and his little niece.

*

The sickness which has plagued him so strongly seems to have faded, if only temporarily - Frank suspects the other inhabitants of the manor aren't familiar enough with his disposition to realize he isn't usually just a pale, sickly thing (although he is more often than he would like) - but it's almost as if the self-revelation of the extent of his feelings towards Gerard had been just the distraction it needed to come back, stronger than ever.

Frank pauses again on the stairwell, one hand on the banister and one splayed out before him, bracing himself up on the stair. He's going to be late for the afternoon lesson, already, having accidentally dozed off in his room for far longer than he had anticipated. It would probably be helped somewhat if he could manage to hold down any food, but his stomach has been in knots for days - even before the sketch in the library, but never better since - and he feels weak, unsettled.

It's almost the holiday, however, in the household - Frank can make an excuse, perhaps - find some place in town to go rest, away from the family, so they don't have to see him, worry about his abilities to carry on in the position. He could get a little room, and just - stay there, until it passes, without anyone expecting to see him or notice him or remember he had ever been in the house.

He realizes that most of it is just his head, swimming with the heat in his chest and his complete and utter *exhaustion* in continuing to deny how truly wretched he feels.

You'll catch a death of cold, his mother says in his head.

It's dark in the stairwell - any light outside blocked by the low,

lumbering clouds rolling in over the treeline, and Frank wheezes out a breath as the rain starts to patter against the glass.

*

By the time he gets to the study the children and Gerard are already there - Frank must look a sight, because Gerard's face falls slightly when he slips into the room and into the light from the fireplace.

"Are you all right?" Gerard asks, in a moment when Matilda and James are distracted with clearing the furniture and books off of the floor to act out the rest of the play.

"I'm fine, thank you," Frank says, not meeting his eyes. He knows Gerard continues to watch him, perhaps cataloging his faults - the sweat at his hairline, his limp collar, rumpled waistcoat, but Frank can't think about it - can't think about anything, truly, beyond just making it through the lesson and collapsing in his room in peace.

*

It's an excruciating lesson. The children are excited, engaged, and Gerard is - simply so - *Gerard*, as usual, helping the children parse out the words in the play that they can't pronounce on their own, glancing at Frank every few moments as though he's waiting for Frank to order him out of the room. Frank can barely breathe, and leans against the table to support his weight. His hands shake around the book in his hands.

"I don't *want* to be Juliet anymore," Matilda says, crossing her arms. "She *dies*."

"I thought you liked that part," Gerard says, "It's very dramatic."

"She dies over a *boy*," Matilda says, rolling her eyes. "Who would ever do that?"

"An excellent question," Gerard says, smiling from his seat on the chaise beside her. "Although one probably better suited to your tutor than to me."

"Why, then, Mr. Iero," Matilda asks, turning to stare at him quizzically.

Frank opens his mouth to speak but has to close it again, pausing to collect his thoughts, especially as they come to him more difficultly

than usual. "It is one of those things I can't actually teach you, I'm afraid," he says slowly. "Love is - it's in all of these books and stories because no one has truly found a way to explain it properly, logically."

"I don't understand," Matilda pouts.

"You will, one day," Frank says. "And then you'll know. You can't learn it, I cannot teach it. You will just...know it."

"But why does she die?" Matilda asks, staring back down at the book in her hands. "It's not a swordfight. She does it to herself."

"Because," Frank starts, then falters slightly. "Love makes people do things they normally wouldn't."

"Like what?"

Frank hesitates. "Love people they shouldn't," he says, carefully. "Or the people society tells them that they shouldn't."

Matilda is, for a moment, quiet. Pensive. "Like how she shouldn't love a Montague?" she asks, looking back up at him.

"Exactly," Frank nods. "And it's not until the end of the play when everyone else realizes that - all the rules they made, and the reasons they had for why these two people could never be together - it just meant heartbreak for *all* of them, and not just Romeo and Juliet."

"That's so sad," Matilda says.

There's a knot in Frank's throat, and he takes a moment to swallow it down, so his voice is steady. "It is," he says, finally. "That's why it's a tragedy."

Matilda is quiet, feet hanging still off the side of the chaise.

"Do you want to move on to another story?" Frank asks, gently.

Matilda shakes her head immediately. "No, I want to finish, I just - I don't want to be Juliet." She raises her head, looking at him. "Will you read her lines?"

"I-" Frank starts, awkward. "I don't know-"

"I'll read them," Gerard says to Matilda, startling Frank. "Mr. Iero can be Romeo. Is that all right?"

She nods, and settles back into her seat on the chaise.

“Romeo has already passed away in the tomb, but Juliet awakens and sends the friar away,” Gerard says, scanning the page in front of him. He stands to his feet and takes a breath, and begins.

*“I will kiss thy lips;
Haply some poison yet doth hang on them,
To make die with a restorative.”*

Frank stills in place the moment Gerard starts reciting the lines - not from the page, but from memory. He’s watching Frank, not gesturing or moving about the room as he normally does, and the words are quiet, focused.

His hands on Frank’s face are a surprise - he hadn’t even been able to follow as he’d taken the three steps between them to fall into his space as he spoke. His fingers are soft; Frank holds his breath.

The kiss is brief, and dry, but it lasts a moment too long for simple playacting - Frank’s eyes shut against his own volition, and the scene narrows to the pinpricks of warmth of Gerard’s fingertips against his jaw.

The touch is gone - the kiss is over - and Gerard draws back, but doesn’t remove himself from Frank’s space, although he drops his hands away.

“Thy lips are warm,” Gerard whispers.

Frank feels as he does when the sickness is too much, cutting off his lungs and squeezing his chest tight. It’s not the sickness, though, but *him*, his horrible, weak insides which are making him flush red.

“That was very nice,” Matilda says, nodding. “Now the part with the dagger.”

“Yes, Uncle,” James agrees from beside her.

“Well, of course,” Gerard says, drawing back another step and turning to the children. “The best part, the knife to the heart.” He gestures the motion, swift and cutting to his own chest, and the children grin, the somber moment of before past.

“Excuse me,” Frank says, not even managing a proper bow before striding towards the door and out into the hallway.

He is terrified for a moment that Gerard will follow, and he will have to explain his behavior, but for the moment the hallway is empty and Frank barely keeps himself from fleeing - someone could be listening, anyone could have seen - and can hurry down the west door and the servant's stairwell and out into the fresh air.

It is dark outside too early, with the short days and the impending storm. Frank won't stay long, but he just - he *cannot* remain inside, see Gerard laugh at his face, or the children ask him questions.

Frank lays a hand on his cheek where Gerard's had lain before and feels so horribly, terribly foolish.

He sets out quickly away from the house - he is on the other side of the house from the window in the study, so there's no chance of anyone in the room seeing where he goes.

The orchard is quiet besides the rustling of dead leaves under his feet, the steadily increasing wind whipping them around his ankles. He continues in until he can no longer see the house through the rough tangle of branches overhead. He pauses, for a moment, closes his eyes and breathes.

There's a slowly building sound, like the swelling of applause, but Frank realizes that it's the storm breaking early. Rain patters on the tree limbs above him but without the leaf cover of warmer seasons Frank finds himself quickly drenched.

There's no use - he has to go back, staying out in weather like this is a death knell, and even his dread at returning isn't enough to hold him out here. He turns and heads back the way he came but a sharp breeze whips through the tunnel of the tree trunks, and it's so cold it startles him into a cough.

Except the cough this time doesn't stop, can't be tamed - the exhaustion he'd been ignoring, the appetite that had whittled away to practically nothing, all of it, comes to a head and he can't control his body, can't stop what is happening.

He's on his knees in the mud, palms spread flat against the quickly dampening earth. He coughs again and there's blood - a spray of it stark against the white of his shirt, and his stomach flips, and he chokes on it, sending himself on another coughing fit, uncontrollable, and he knows, he *knows*, has seen it before.

There's a sheet over his face, but Frank still recognizes his father. The cloth is damp, limp with sweat, and it sticks to his cheekbones, the straight nose, the hollow where Frank knows his mouth is still open.

It's too warm in the room but the windows are shut, the curtains drawn. The late summer storm outside pounds against the glass, covering the sound of his mother quietly crying, and filling the void where his father makes none.

He takes a step forward - to comfort his mother, maybe, or to touch the sheet, see if it's still warm, or just to break the moment which seems so frozen, he isn't quite sure - and his mother turns quickly at the noise. She stares at him like she has never seen him before, and Frank can see that she's worried the top button of her dress so much it has fallen off completely, and the thread hangs loose.

He coughs, barely, overcome with the stifling air of the room, and she clutches at the missing button, other hand fisted in the sheet of the bed. She doesn't say anything but there is a hand at the back of his neck - an uncle, he thinks - leading him out of the room and closing the door behind him. There's only the storm, then, and the sound of Frank's feet as he sits in one of the too-high chairs by the door and drags the tips of his shoes over the carpet, and waits, tries not to make a sound.

-

It's pouring, now, the storm falling harsh and freezing, and Frank is already shivering so hard it's hard to keep himself upright. He has to get back to the house. He must. He looks up though the motions of his coughing and he can't even see the lights from the house through the cut of the tree branches. Lightning flashes brightly, briefly illuminating the grounds, and thunder drowns out even the overwhelming hollow of his own, gasping sounds.

*He pushes himself forward - one step, another, hands grasping at slick tree roots, but it's too much, he can't breathe, he can't *breathe*, and he thinks there is more lightning, but it is just the spots in front of his eyes melding together, bright and blinding.*

He shuts his eyes, wheezes, desperately trying to inhale, and falls.

*

He sees his mother, in her dress with the loose button, standing by the wall of the parlor. He's dying, lying on the floor in agony, and she watches, her eyes wet.

“You’ll catch a death of cold,” she says, so sadly, so quietly Frank can barely hear her, especially with the breeze blowing dead leaves all up and down the halls.

“It’s the best part,” Matilda says. “So terribly *dramatic*.”

She’s holding his mother’s hand in hers, both of them preternaturally still. Matilda’s curls are loose around her face, dark as coal, and she’s wearing the dress she wore at the birthday party but the hem is filthy, ragged. The top button of her dress is missing, worried loose.

“A plague on both your houses,” she says. “On both your houses.”

“Matilda,” Frank says, gesturing to call her closer, but she’s backing up, into the shadows of the parlor.

“Both your houses,” she repeats, and then they’re gone.

*

He’s back in the pub at Dalton, his mother’s necklace still in his palm, his skin still stinking of gin. The stranger from the bookstore is there, a hand on the back of his neck, and he’s standing so close Frank can smell his clothes, wet from the rain.

“He likes your eyes,” Gerard says from beside him, but when Frank turns he realizes that Gerard is the one with the hand on the back of his neck, and he looks so sad, so drawn. “It’s so rare you actually look at anyone with them. Do you know what they’re like?”

“Gerard-” Frank starts, and Gerard moves his hand around, a mirror of how he held Frank’s jaw as he kissed him during the play, but shifts his thumb so it rests against Frank’s lips.

“Do you know?” Gerard asks again, and leans closer, but Frank can still sense the man from the bookstore standing behind him, hands hovering by his shoulder blades, and he closes his eyes.

*

Frank turns, and his father is sitting at his piano between the two windows.

“Hello, m’boy,” he says, not turning. It’s a cheerful song, but simple - like a lullaby, from years ago. Frank can’t place it, and every time he walks closer the room turns with him, shifting under his feet so he

can't see his father's face, just the back of his head, the span of his shoulders, the way his shirt sleeves are pushed firmly up to his elbows.

"I'm drowning," Frank says, because he can feel the water in his lungs, so full it's pouring out of the corners of his eyes, down his cheeks like a stream.

"Swim harder, then," his father says, shifting on the creaky stool to play the chorus.

"Teach me," Frank says, and the water's coming out of his mouth now, too, and all of his clothes are soaking, and he's worried the top button of his shirt loose.

"I can't," his father says. "You just have to know."

*

Frank opens his eyes.

It's dim in the room, and he can't tell where he is - he exhales, shakily, but the relief of being able to breathe even slightly is enough to make his hands shake. He's so weak, he can't even turn to see where he is -

There's a hand at his brow, and Frank closes his eyes against the cold, cool relief, and falls into darkness again.

*

Frank opens his eyes, and this time the room is a little brighter. He can barely move his head - it feels as though all of the muscles in his back have seized up, like he was in some kind of fight. He coughs again, just slightly, and realizes the ache is because of his lungs, the force it took his whole body to fight them.

He leans his head slightly to the side and is shocked to see that he is - he is inside, but not in his own room. It's slightly bigger, with more furnishings, and Frank realizes that he is in the other wing of the manor, where the family rooms are.

The soft light of pre-dawn is all that illuminates the room, heavy curtains pulled almost fully closed over the glass. There's a chair in the corner, and -

Gerard is in the chair, fast asleep, hands folded lightly on his chest

over the spine of a book. His neck is at a strange angle, like he hadn't meant to sleep, and his clothes are rumpled, mismatched, so completely unlike the usual way that he dresses that Frank has to squint and make sure the resemblance is not a trick of the light, or the fever.

It is him, though, as still as the painting in the gallery, and Frank's heart aches. He's suddenly exhausted again as though the tiniest moment could drain everything out of him, and although he resists he is pulled back down into the dark.

*

He wakes, this time, to something cool and metal against his chest, but he keeps his eyes closed and just breathes, trying not to make any extended movements.

"Much better," the voice says, and the cool metal shifts to the other side of his chest. "Yes, much better. It will take some time, but a marked improvement." Frank doesn't recognize the voice, but it sounds as if it belongs to an elder gentleman - the metal disc shifts again, and *oh* - a doctor.

"It's a good thing you found him when you did," the doctor says, removing the metal disc and closing the flap of Frank's shirt. "I don't think he would have lasted all night out there in the rain."

Frank doesn't know who he is speaking to, as no one replies, but he can hear the slight murmur of voices and the slow, controlled close of the bedroom door as the doctor heads back down the hall.

Frank cracks open his eyes and it is, it's Gerard - his back is to Frank, and he's looking out the window and down onto the lawns. His shoulders are slumped, exhausted, and he's rubbing at a knot on the back of his neck like it plagues him.

A small cough gets caught in Frank's throat, against his will, and even though he tries to quiet it it escapes. It's barely even a noise, but Gerard still turns around suddenly, like a shock.

"*Frank*," he says, and takes two huge steps towards the bed before seemingly stopping himself short. "Are you - the doctor's just gone, do you need me to get him -"

Frank shakes his head and covers his mouth with his hand to stifle another cough. Gerard looks almost terrified. Frank won't be stopped

from speaking, though, he has to get it out.

"I'm so sorry," he finally manages, hand still over most of his mouth. His voice is wrecked, raw, and it pains him. "Sir, I'm -"

"No, don't-" Gerard says, taking another half-step forward, palms up again, almost like when they first met in the pantry. "Don't. Just - sleep, if you can."

"I feel like I've slept for days," Frank says, sighing a little. He's groggy, and his shirt is still damp from the fever, even though his face feels cooler to the touch.

"You did," Gerard says, matter-of-factly. "It's been almost a fortnight."

"A *fortnight*-" Frank starts, and then coughs again. They lack the ferocity of the ones of the night in the orchard, but Frank is still terrified to look at his hand when he draws it back in case it's coated in blood. It isn't, and he relaxes as much as he is able.

"You really do need to rest," Gerard says, taking another step forward, until he is actually close enough that he is almost touching the bed. "The children have been worried sick about you. They also haven't had lessons in weeks. Last I heard they were running wild, like little opinionated dogs."

Frank pushes himself towards the edge of the bed, but fails to make any progress. "I can go back to work, I can, just-"

Gerard stops him with a hand on his chest, pushing him back down against the stack of pillows behind him. "Frank, no."

"I can," Frank repeats, pushing weakly at his hand. "I'm fine. I'm truly fine, I feel much better, I'm sorry for troubling you, but -"

"Frank," Gerard says. "You almost died. I - we thought you had died."

Frank goes still, his whole body freezing.

"So you're going to stay here," Gerard says, gently, but with an edge to it that brooks no argument, "and you're going to get *better*."

"All right," Frank relents, a little breathlessly. The thought of Gerard having to find him, to carry him in from the storm, is mortifying enough. The thought that someone else - the *children* might have worried, might have seen him in that state, is enough to make his

heart ache with regret.

He settles back into the pillows as comfortably as he can, and although sleep does not come as easy as it did previously, he closes his eyes and breathes steady until Gerard seems to relax as well, retreating to his chair in the corner. He sits, watching Frank, a finger against his lips, but like he isn't there at all.

*

Frank does, quite slowly, get better. It's terribly dull, for the most part - he can barely keep his eyes open for a week after the fever breaks. He sleeps the days away, in the same bed, same shirt, although sometimes when he awakes there's a new, crisply folded nightshirt at the foot of the bed, on the small chest of drawers.

Gerard is there, more frequently than not, usually carrying a new book for Frank that he has pulled from the family's library shelves. Frank is polite, demure, and avoids eye contact on more than one occasion. A few times he awakens to either Gerard, standing by the window or curled up in the chair in the corner, feet on the footrest. Sometimes, though, he awakens to find Gerard watching him like before, silent and still, lost in thought. He accidentally meets Gerard's eye, however, and Gerard blinks rapidly, surprised.

Frank ducks his head, breaking the contact, and the moment is gone, and Frank wishes desperately that he could make it return.

When he lies in bed with his eyelids closed he can almost imagine how differently things could have gone - but he can't even picture it for long, as the shame of his actions burns hot in his belly, and ruins even the idlest fantasies. He is such a fool, and a burden to the house, and now everyone in the household knows it.

*

A week and a half after the fever breaks, Frank pushes himself up and out of the bed. It's almost staggering, being on his own two feet again, but such a blessed relief. He hobbles his way to the washbasin, stopping to sit and rest on the little chest by the bed. The effort is enough to send a bead of sweat down the side of his neck, but he palms it away and moves on.

He takes his time carefully and meticulously washing his skin, scrubbing his face and the back of his neck, behind his ears and under his eyes. He shaves with the razor in the kit beside the basin,

carefully, his hands still shakier than normal, and combs his hair into place. There are knots all over the crown of his head from where he must have tossed relentlessly against the sheets in the bed, and his eyes water as he forcefully works them out.

There are some simple clothes in the wardrobe in the corner - of course they would be considerate to bring in his own things, he does not know why he is still so surprised - and he selects new undergarments, new pants, a crisp, clean shirt, his waistcoat, and jacket. It all...hangs a bit more off of his frame than he is used to, and he can't help but frown a little as he pulls at the hems, trying to put himself in order.

It takes him about twice as long to make it down the staircase than it normally does, having to pause every so often to stop and breathe, a hand upon his side. Eventually he succeeds, however, although his plan to make it to the kitchen and attempt to beg some food from Chantal is thwarted completely by the presence of Matilda and James, hand-in-hand with Gerard, apparently on their way out of the house and down to the stables.

"Mr. Iero!" Matilda calls, and drops Gerard's hand immediately to run over the expanse of the Main Hall and cling to his trouser leg. Frank has to clutch rather tightly to the banister to stay upright, but he's so selfishly glad to see them he cannot be too bothered.

"You're all right," she says, tugging at his trousers. "When are you coming back to teach us? Uncle doesn't come by so much anymore, and he's always in a *mood*."

"Matilda," Gerard says sharply. "Leave Mr. Iero alone."

"But-" she starts, dejected.

"No," he replies, cutting her off immediately. "Mr. Iero needs his rest."

"I'm feeling much better, actually," Frank says, a little guiltily. Gerard looks almost - disappointed? It's difficult for Frank keep his face passive, and not fidget with his hair or shirt sleeves.

"I'm glad to hear it," Gerard says. "We're heading out to the stables to visit some of the horses - It's quite grey outside, though, I'd suggest you stay by the fire."

He turns to leave and the children hesitantly follow, darting looks at Frank from over their shoulders. Frank takes the last two steps down

to the floor and towards Gerard, unable to stop himself.

“Gerard -” Frank starts, and Gerard turns, immediately. The children stop, and Matilda darts a glance between the two of them, completely confused.

“Sir-” Frank corrects himself, but Gerard just turns to the children, motioning them to continue on outside. He waits until they’re around the corner before turning back to Frank, hands clasped behind his back.

Frank’s humiliated for his gaffe in front of the children. He clenches his hands by his side, though, and breathes, trying to collect his words.

“If I have - done something to offend,” he says, “I am incredibly sorry, and I apologize.”

Gerard pauses, just a moment, and tilts his head slightly to the side. “I know that you are sorry, Frank.” Gerard says. “You have made it quite clear that you are sorry. But to tell the truth, I still don’t know exactly what you are sorry *for*.”

Frank’s breath catches in his throat.

“For getting sick?” Gerard continues, his gaze shifting over Frank’s shoulder to the staircase behind him. “Because that doesn’t seem like something to apologize for, or something that happened of your own volition. For hiding the symptoms? Perhaps, although understandable.”

He catches Frank’s eye, then, and Frank feels ill all over, like a new fever washing over him. “Are you sorry that you ran,” Gerard asks, “or that you didn’t run far enough?”

Frank is silent. He can’t answer. He doesn’t know.

The moment extends too long. Gerard doesn’t nod, just exhales deeply and turns smoothly on his heel to walk out of the Main Hall, through the same exit the children had passed through earlier. Frank stands at the foot of the staircase long after his footsteps have faded but can’t follow; he breathes steadily, and tries not to feel the loss.

*

“Frank,” a voice says behind him, and Frank pauses in his notes to

glance up towards the doorway.

“Lady Way,” Frank says, standing immediately to bow properly. He probably looks terribly foolish - he’s been working with some of the research and philosophical texts all morning, and there are no doubt ink stains all over his hands and cuffs.

“I heard that you were up and moving around again,” she says, smiling. “I wanted to see how you were faring.”

“Oh - yes, I’m doing much better, thank you,” he says, nodding deeply again.

“You gave us all quite a fright,” she says lightly, but sincere. She looks so much like Matilda in the way she stands, out of the view of any guests, and Frank is reminded again that she is both a Lady, and a mother.

“I’m so sorry for any inconvenience.”

“James tells me you were feeling ill for weeks,” she continues, “but never said anything, or asked for any care.”

“I -” Frank starts, then stops himself.

“Continue,” she says, not unkindly.

“I am - not used to asking for care,” Frank says, honestly. “Especially from employers who have already been far too generous.”

Lady Way is silent for a moment. She’s wearing a long, warm wrap about her shoulders against the chill of that part of the house, and she runs a tassel carefully through her fingers.

“Sir Way had to marry down to marry me, did you know?” she says.

The non-sequitur is so unexpected Frank can only blink at her, foolishly.

“He didn’t accept a dowry, because there wasn’t one to give. But he did not care, and neither did I. I did not come from a poor family, but certainly not a wealthy one like the Ways, with a history or a manor such as this. The first month I spent in this house I was almost afraid to ask for anything, say anything, lest someone find me wanting.” She pauses, her hands still on the edge of the wrap in her hands. Her gaze is straight, firm but warm. “But you’ll learn, Frank, as I did - this house is not the thing. The people inside this house are what makes it

what it is - people who care about each other,” she says. “With a compassion I’ve never known elsewhere.”

Frank can barely breathe. The sky outside the window is grey, the light dim, and snow heavy in the corners of the window panes, and the whole moment is still, surreal.

“I’m glad to hear you are feeling better,” Lady Way says, wrapping her shawl tighter around her shoulders. “Whenever you are ready to continue lessons, at your discretion, please do so - I know the children miss you, as well.”

“Yes, Lady Way,” Frank says, bowing even deeper than before.

“Oh, and Frank -” she says, pausing on her way out, hand on the door frame.

“Yes?” he asks.

“Dinner every night is at seven. We would be delighted to have you join us.”

“Tonight?” Frank asks, eyes widening.

“Every night,” Lady Way says. “That table is far too large to have so few around it.”

She leaves, and Frank has to take a moment before he can sit back down at the desk and return to his notes. He can’t remember a thing about what he was writing. Everything is a blur in his mind. He lays the pen down and runs a hand over his face, sighing when he feels the smear of ink against his cheek.

*

“I *hate* winter,” Matilda says, sighing down at her book. “It’s the worst.”

“I would have to agree with you,” Frank says, tucking his scarf tighter into his coat. The fire in the room is warm, stoked high, but he isn’t taking any chances, especially when he still feels weaker than normal. Not again.

“Christmas is over, and there’s nothing until spring,” Matilda continues. “We can’t go run outside, no one comes to visit, Uncle is *leaving*-”

“Master Way is leaving?” Frank asks, hands stilling on his book. He hadn’t seen Gerard in several days, not since their conversation by the staircase, but he hadn’t been *avoiding* him. Not *intentionally*, but Gerard certainly hadn’t stopped by their lessons since Frank started back at work.

“He just told us at tea,” James says. “He’s going back to the continent. He says it’s too cold here.”

“When?” Frank asks.

“He’s already ordered the coach for tomorrow morning,” James says sadly. “I wish he wouldn’t go.”

“What can be so good about the *continent*,” Matilda says with disdain. “That he would just *leave* us.”

Frank can’t voice it - can barely even allow himself to think it - but he wants to tell her, reassure her - no, not you. He’s not leaving *you*, but the thought makes his gut shrivel, darken with sadness, and it is not until James actually prods him in the shoulder that Frank realizes he’s tuned out half the lesson.

*

Gerard doesn’t show up for dinner. Frank is already so nervous about sitting at the main table again, especially after his illness, that it’s almost enough to distract him from how he can’t stop jumping at the slightest noise to look behind him hoping to see Gerard enter, but it’s no use.

“He’s packing up his things,” Sir Way says, in response to Matilda’s question. “I’m afraid he rather spread out more than he’s used to, since he stayed here so long, and the carriage needs to leave early if it’s to make it to town in enough time.”

“It was so nice to have him with us for the holiday,” Lady Way says. “The house is so much happier with him here.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Sir Way says, sighing a little and sitting back in his chair. “But Lord knows he’ll do what he thinks is best.”

Matilda lays her fork carefully across her plate and sits back in her chair, mimicking her father’s position.

“Don’t be too sad, Mattie,” Sir Way says, reaching out to touch one of

her curls. "He's promised me that he'll say goodbye to the two of you before he goes, and his letters will be full of lovely pictures."

"I don't want letters," Matilda says, voice close to tears. "I want Uncle to *stay*."

"Yes, well," Sir Way says, and then glances up at Frank for a moment - just a moment, but long enough - before moving to gaze back down to his daughter. "Be sure to tell him that when you see him."

Matilda nods, a little stiffly, and Frank's hands are cold around the silverware, his whole body vibrating with the desire to bolt.

*

As soon as he is able to excuse himself politely from the dining room he does so, bowing sincerely and citing a desire to rest as a way to pass on the final course. He's thrumming with nervous energy, and he almost fumbles with his chair as he pushes it back in to the table.

The halls are dark, preternaturally cold with the early onset of the night snow. He hurries through the halls as quickly as he can, not even caring that anyone else about would be able to hear his shoes on the wooden stairs.

He doesn't know where Gerard's room is, but it has to be in the same wing as the others, and he remembers the way to the room where they brought him when he was ill. He'll knock on every other door if he has to, as long as it isn't too late -

He cuts through the painting gallery on the other side of the Main Hall - and almost trips over the thick edge of the rug at the sight of Gerard, standing at the other side of the gallery at one of the long windows, watching the snow.

"Gerard," Frank says, almost in a hush.

Gerard turns and stares at him, clearly surprised. "Frank," he replies, then stops, hesitating. "Come to say goodbye, have you?" His voice is light, like they're strangers, just introduced at a party.

Frank is panting so hard it's the only thing he can hear besides the rushing in his ears.

"Don't go," he blurts out. "Don't leave."

“Why not?” Gerard asks, dropping his hand from the windowpane - he’d been drawing little swirling figures in the frost, Frank can see, and his fingers are wet. “I’m not actually tied to this house. I came back with the plan to leave again, nothing has changed.”

“I’m sorry I ran,” Frank says, breathlessly. “Don’t run further away.”

Gerard is silent, but he watches Frank’s face with an intense expression, mouth just slightly open.

Frank closes the distance between them this time, taking the steps forward and bringing his hands up to Gerard’s jaw for the kiss.

It’s brief, but warm, and Gerard opens immediately - he tastes like the cigarettes he keeps in the case in his pocket, and tea, and Frank knows when Gerard brings his hands to Frank’s face by the shock of cold water from his fingertips against his cheek.

Frank breaks the kiss, drawing back, but leaves his hands cupping Gerard’s jaw. “Don’t leave,” he says again.

“Come with me,” Gerard says, hushed, and Frank blinks at him, mind racing. To - the continent? Leave the house? The job, and the children?

“Upstairs,” Gerard says, as if he knows his train of thought. “Come with me upstairs.”

“The family,” Frank says, and Gerard shakes his head.

“They’re at dinner and then the parlor until late,” Gerard says. “No one will see. Come with me,” he repeats, and his voice is raw.

Frank nods, and Gerard swipes his thumb gently across his cheekbone before releasing him, and pulling him down the hall to the back staircase.

Frank spends the entire way up the stairwell and through the hallways of the main wing absolutely terrified that someone will see them, will stop them, will ruin the heady silence between them that hints at what is to come. They have to stop at one point while Gerard glances around the corner, checking to see the way is clear, and Frank takes the moment to press close, touch the back of Gerard’s jacket. He can hear Gerard’s hitch of an exhale at the touch, although it’s barely enough pressure to be noticed.

There's a moment, where Frank almost hesitates, almost stops. His mind is scattered, thoughts everywhere, and a voice reminds him that he can turn back, can stop himself from doing this, just turn and go back to his room where it's quiet, and safe, and there is nothing there to make him feel unsure - or wanted. The thought of it is enough. He exhales, steadying himself, steeling his resolve, and keeps in step with Gerard in the dark.

The corridor with Gerard's bedroom is beautiful, with thick carpets and fine, layered wallpaper in between the large hanging portraits. Gerard slides into the third room on the right with barely a noise, just a quick glance over his shoulder to make sure Frank is following before he's pulling them in and shutting and locking the door behind them.

It's Gerard who initiates the kiss this time, pressing Frank tight up against the door, cold hands against his waist. Frank moans a little, caught by surprise, and Gerard presses his whole body against him, a solid, warm weight holding him in place against the wood.

"I've wanted to kiss you that night in the pantry," Gerard murmurs, in between breaths. "Before you realized who I was, and you teased me -"

"I thought you were a *thief*," Frank admits, kissing him back. "A very well-dressed thief."

"That's much more exciting than a no-good prodigal son," Gerard says. They are flush against the door and Frank can't imagine more than this, can't think of wanting anything more than having this - already too much, and more than he deserves.

Gerard pulls at the front of Frank's shirt and away from the door, leading them backwards, until they approach the wide, unkempt bed in the center of the room.

"Yes, you're terribly boring," Frank says, hiding his nervousness as Gerard maneuvers them until Frank is the one with his knees against the crux of the mattress, his body folding down as Gerard presses him back. "So dull. I really can't stand it."

"There it is again," Gerard says, tilting his head at him, pausing with one knee up on the bed. "*Teasing* me. Get you away from your books and your study, and you're positively terrible."

"Is that a bad thing?" Frank asks, breathless, terrified for a moment

that he has gone too far, even as Gerard shifts over him to mouth at the skin underneath his ear, other hand warm and wide on the side of his neck. Frank can barely contain himself at the feeling - his toes curl in his shoes, and his hips raise, even held down by Gerard's weight on top of him.

"Only if you stop," Gerard says, and bites down until Frank gasps. He doesn't know what to do with his hands - Gerard seems to know, but Frank can't bear to actually have to ask, and settles for resting them on the outside of Gerard's thighs.

It seems to work, however, as Gerard moans into his mouth and moves against him, seemingly involuntarily. Gerard pulls back just enough to look into Frank's eyes. His lips are wet, face flushed, and for the first time Frank can concentrate long enough to realize that he can feel Gerard against his hips - *really* feel him, and Frank's own body's reciprocation in kind.

He's almost glad for the fact that they are still both fully clothed, until Gerard shifts his weight and the rub of the layers between him seems to make him feel even *more*, and it is quickly bordering on uncomfortable, unbearable.

"What can I do?" Gerard asks, hushed, but serious.

"Anything," Frank replies. He doesn't quite know what he is committing to, but can't bring himself to care. He feels so rash, so strange and bold, so unlike himself, and it's better than he has felt in years. Ever. Gerard grins, wide and bright at his answer.

"Do you mind if -" Gerard starts, then pauses again. "Can I see you?" he finally asks, palms flat against Frank's stomach through his shirt. Frank just nods, and Gerard quickly slides down the bed to work at the laces to Frank's shoes, just enough so he can pull them off and toss them aside. Frank could probably help - he undoes a few of the buttons of his shirt, yanking the hem out of his trousers in the process - but mostly he lies back, watching Gerard methodically make his way up the bed and over Frank's body again, shedding his own clothes in the process.

There's no light in the room except for the fire, burning low, having been ignored most of the day. Gerard's skin is pale all over - soft and smooth in the dim light, and Frank gets caught up in staring at the dip of his collarbone, where his throat makes a little hollow. He touches it with his thumb, before he can stop himself, and then lays his palms

over Gerard's chest. He still can't believe he can do this - that he is allowed to do this - but Gerard holds still, just watching Frank's face.

He can see the half-illuminated room behind Gerard, including the trunks Gerard has scattered about the room, thrown open and half-filled with the contents of his dressers. He pauses to look at them more closely but Gerard breaks his concentration with a kiss, his hands firmly pulling at the front of Frank's trousers until Frank lifts his hips enough to help Gerard slide them down and off.

The room is still chilled, even with the fire, and Frank's body prickles with goosebumps, all down the white of his thigh. He is terrified - thrilled - he's not quite sure - he is completely in the dark, with no idea of what to do, or how to go about it, no precedent to follow, and it feels - blissfully, happily - like falling. Gerard is still wearing his trousers, shoes and shirt dropped by the edge of the bed, and Frank's hands still at the edge of his own shirt before he shifts to pull it off in a quick, sharp movement, like the removal of a bandage. He is so exposed, then, all of him laid bare, and Gerard just stares at him, mouth slightly open.

"Is this okay?" Gerard asks, moving to balance over him, hands on both sides of his head, sinking in the messy sheets. Frank nods, again, at a loss for words.

Gerard kisses him again, lowering himself down, and Frank's hands tangle with Gerard's as they both work to shove Gerard's trousers down. He breaks the kiss only long enough to kick at his trousers until they join the rest of his clothes on the floor.

Frank tangles his hands in Gerard's hair to pull him back - he can't stop kissing him, can't believe how good it feels, how good he *tastes* - but Gerard breaks off again, pulling back, eyes wide.

"Are you cold?" he asks.

"What?" Frank replies, dumbly. "Am I - no, I'm not -"

"Are you *sure*?" Gerard asks, frowning a little. "You cannot be ill like that again."

"I won't," Frank says, trying to pull him back in for a kiss, but Gerard ducks his head a little, unsatisfied.

"Are you sure? I mean - I've got you undressed on top of the covers and it's winter, do you -"

“You do, yes, that is exactly what is happening right here,” Frank says, although he can’t keep the teasing tone out of his voice. Gerard is so - *flustered*, which is something that Frank has never seen before. “Which was of your own doing, and my acquiescence, and if you are terribly worried about it then I suggest *hurrying* might be an excellent plan.”

“*Terrible*,” Gerard says, but fondly, and rolls on top of him before breaking the kiss and moving back down the bed.

“Wait, where are you - come back,” Frank says.

“I will,” Gerard says, grinning. “But first - I want to do something.”

Frank opens his mouth to say something, *some* sort of comment, but then Gerard lowers his head and his mouth is -

“Oh my *God*,” Frank gasps. “Stay there, don’t come back, oh *God*.”

He clamps a hand over his mouth to cover the noises, but it’s almost impossible, he can’t seem to stop making such *sounds* - panting, little moans, especially at the noises Gerard is making around his cock. Gerard’s tongue - his whole *mouth*, God, and his hands are wide and tight on Frank’s bare hips, fingers digging into the skin as he pulls Frank farther down the bed to angle his head closer.

Frank gives up on covering his moans and tangles his hands in Gerard’s hair. He can barely see him, in the fading light from the fire, but at one point when he glances down he can see the slick stretch of Gerard’s lips around his cock, and it’s like a fire in his veins, racing down his spine to pool in his belly.

“Oh, God,” he says again, the feeling building too much, so much, too soon, and he almost wants to push Gerard off because he knows, but Gerard doesn’t move away, just seems to hold Frank more firmly in place.

“Gerard-” Frank manages, and then the wave rushes over him, like pinpricks through every pore, and he bucks up into Gerard’s mouth, hands still tight in his hair, knuckles against Gerard’s scalp. He can’t even *think*, like his whole body has melted away into the sheets, and he’s so warm he’s sweating, all down his chest, panting, and then before he can move Gerard is kissing him again, rutting up against him, and he tastes deep and strange and *oh, God* -

Gerard is shifting against him, and Frank can feel *all* of him, tastes himself in Gerard’s mouth, on his tongue. Gerard’s already panting,

moving fast against Frank's hip, but Frank pushes back on his chest enough so he can angle Gerard on his side, still pressed close.

"Wait," Frank says, in a voice that doesn't quite seem to belong to him. "I want to see."

Gerard moans, but his motion slows, and Frank rolls so he can brace his forehead against Gerard's chest, angled down, so he can watch Gerard touch himself. He can't stop watching, utterly fascinated by the flush of Gerard's chest that reaches all the way down to his cock. His hand is wrapped around his cock, stroking in time with his ragged breathing, and Frank has to touch it, has to *know*.

He wraps his hand around Gerard's cock and pulls him close, so they are a tangle of limbs and hands and bodies in the mess of the sheets, and when Gerard starts making tight, pained little noises Frank pulls back - keeps his hand moving on Gerard's cock, slick and twisting and faster, now, like he sometimes does to himself in his own bed - and kisses him as Gerard's release hits. He can feel it warm and wet against his thigh, between his fingers, his forearm, and Gerard moans so heavily into Frank's mouth, it's less like a kiss and more just breathing together.

Frank's barely cognizant of moving after that, but somehow he is, and he realizes that it is Gerard, arms wrapped around his waist, tugging and rolling him until he can pull the sheets and heavy comforter up from where they'd almost kicked them off the side of the bed, and up and over their bodies.

"Are you cold?" Gerard asks, pulling him close, until their skin is pressed flush once again. Frank knows he'll wake up sticky in the morning, and filthy, hands and bodies covered, but he has never felt more content, so presently comfortable in a space, and cannot bring himself to disentangle them.

"Yes," Frank says, as level as he can. "Quite cold. I will have to stay here, it seems. For the good of my health."

"*Terrible*," Gerard repeats, but wraps his arms tighter around him so both his hands lie flat on Frank's chest, around the side of his ribcage. Frank laughs - so suddenly it's a shock to the both of them, and he's embarrassed as he covers his mouth, *some* sense of propriety reminding him of just how absurd the whole situation truly is.

Gerard presses his face into the crook of Frank's neck, and Frank can feel his smile against his skin. He wants to stay awake - make sure it

isn't all just another fever dream and he is actually in fact back in his own bed - but he's still unfortunately not fully recovered, and exhaustion hit him sooner than he'd like, and he falls asleep almost immediately, Gerard's thumb tracing patterns against his chest.

*

Frank wakes, startled. It takes him a moment to put everything together - the light is all wrong in the room, coming in at a different angle, and there are more furnishings - a large, heavy desk in the corner, absolutely covered with stacks of sketchbooks and novels, a writing desk on the other side mostly covered in scratched out, scribbled upon papers, several wardrobes and dressers.

Gerard's room. He is in Gerard's room. Frank takes a moment to curl his toes in the warm sheets, close his eyes and give in to the smile that threatens to overtake him. When he turns, however, Gerard is gone.

He touches the space where he slept and it is cold, the barest touch of warmth even hinting that he was there in the first place. Frank is confused, and when he dazedly looks around the room he realizes that the trunks are gone, the dresser drawers that were flung open the night before closed carefully again.

He's gone, his mind cries, and he clutches at the sheet. He'd thought - he'd thought Gerard would stay, now, after - last night - but -

There's a gentle, quiet rap at the door before it's quietly pushed open, and Frank instinctively grabs at the sheet to pull it higher over himself.

It's Gerard. He smiles at Frank, so easy, hair still rumpled, but the knot in Frank's gut only tightens.

He'll be sure to say goodbye to you before he goes.

Gerard slides in the crack of the door, closing and locking it behind him before approaching the bed. He leans in, but pauses, tilting his head slightly.

"I've seen that face," Gerard says, looking down to Frank's mouth and back up to meet Frank's eyes, smile fading. "That's the someone-wrote-in-one-of-your-favorite-books-with-real-ink face. I thought that was reserved for Mattie."

"Are you *leaving*?" Frank asks, hands still fisted in the sheet.

Gerard frowns. "How can I be leaving?" he says. "I just returned."

"Where are your trunks?" Frank says, and can't deny that his voice gets a little high, and he's sure his face is flushed.

"Back in the closet."

"Not on the carriage?" Frank asks.

"Why would they be on the carriage? I canceled the carriage. I actually just returned from canceling the carriage, after I unpacked the trunks, all while you slept on."

Frank pauses, and then releases his grip on the sheets. "You're laughing at me."

"Just the slightest," Gerard says, and leans in to kiss him, warm and sweet. "I have to admit I like when you get all angry with me - you're quite a stoic little thing, most of the time - it's like a little victory."

"You are terrible," Frank says, but allows Gerard to push him back down on the bed. Gerard crawls in, shoes and all, and sits so his thighs bracket Frank's hips, over the covers. They kiss, and it's so comfortable, so new, and something pools warm in Frank's belly.

"Frank," Gerard says, pulling back the slightest bit. He's crouched over, forearms against Frank's chest, buttons from his shirt sleeves pressing into his skin.

Frank waits, and Gerard runs a finger over Frank's jaw. His brow is furrowed, like he's considering something serious.

"I am sorry I ran," Gerard begins. "Or that - I made you want to, but mostly that I ran - was going to run. Mikey called me a coward, but I just -" he hesitates, and Frank ignores the swooping in his chest at the idea that Mikey - *Sir Way* knows, and apparently *approves*, enough to try and make Gerard stay - but Gerard continues. "I didn't know, and I just - I was so in love with you by then, and I didn't want to scare you or pressure you if you didn't feel the same, and-"

"I know," Frank says, quietly.

"You do?" Gerard asks, eyes so wide, so gentle, fixated on Frank. Frank merely nods, and pushes a stray hair out of Gerard's face.

"So you'll stay," Frank says. "And I'll stay."

“And I won’t bother you in lessons anymore.”

“And you will continue to bother me in lessons whenever you please,” Frank says.

“And I’ll stay,” Gerard agrees, and leans in and kisses him again, and his hands are warm, soft against the exposed skin above the covers, and Frank can’t believe it completely - he half-expects to wake up from a dream again, or in the orchard, staring up at the impending storm through the broken leaves, but there’s no dream, no storm - just a branch from the tree outside, tapping lightly against the frosted glass, in almost a strange, familiar beat, like an old song he once knew.

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